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FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6869
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
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SAIGON 10482 7/2/71

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 10482

LIMDIS
DEPT PLEASE PASS WHITE HOUSE FOR KISSINGER.
CINCPAC FOR POLAD

SUBJ: THE VIETNAMESE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION -- CURRENT ASSESSMENT

1. SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: IN WEIGHING THE CURRENT OUTLOOK FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, THREE MAJOR QUESTIONS EMERGE: A) WILL MINH AND KY WITHDRAW FROM THE RACE, LEAVING THIEU UNOPPOSED; B) WHAT EFFECT WILL KY HAVE ON THE ELECTION IF HE STAYS IN; AND C) HOW FAIR AND CREDITABLE WILL THE ELECTION BE?

2. THE LIST OF SERIOUS PROSPECTIVE CANDIDATES REMAINS LIMITED TO THIEU, MINH AND KY. ALTHOUGH THE LAW TO GOVERN THE ELECTION WENT INTO EFFECT ON JUNE 23, NO ONE HAS YET FORMALLY DECLARED HIS CANDIDACY; ALL THREE ARE NEVERTHELESS CAMPAIGNING ACTIVELY, EACH IN HIS INDIVIDUAL STYLE.

(1) 3. THIEU IS ABLY PURSUING HIS STRATEGY OF CONCENTRATING ON THE COUNTRYSIDE AND ON WINNING THE BLOC VOTE. HE CONTINUES HIS WEEKLY (OR MORE FREQUENT) VISITS TO THE PROVINCES, MEETING LOCAL OFFICIALS, EMPHASIZING HIS ADMINISTRATION'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND REITERATING ITS BASIC STANCE OF PEACE THROUGH

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STRENGTH. MINH, ALTHOUGH NOW CLEARLY A CANDIDATE, STRESSES HE WILL WITHDRAW IF THE ELECTION APPEARS UNFAIR. HE IS EMPHASIZING THE PEACE THEME, CAPITALIZING ON HIS PERSONAL PRESTIGE, AND STILL AVOIDING POLITICAL DEALS. THE MAJOR CHANGE IN THE PAST COUPLE OF MONTHS HAS BEEN KY'S VIGOROUS ENTRY INTO THE CONTEST. HE IS SCRAMBLING EVERYWHERE FOR SUPPORT, TRYING TO PICTURE HIMSELF AS A BETTER NATIONALIST THAN THIEU AND AS MIDWAY BETWEEN THIEU AND MINH ON THE PEACE ISSUE. HIS CRITICISM OF THIEU IS VITRIOLIC, HIS TACTICS DIVISIVE. PROVIDED A REPORTED UNDERSTANDING WITH MINH WORKS OUT, IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT KY WILL BE ABLE TO OBTAIN THE NECESSARY ENDORSEMENTS TO QUALIFY. BUT, AS A NORTHERNER HE HAS NO CHANCE TO WIN (BARRING MAJOR UNFORESEEN EVENTS) ALTHOUGH HE MAY ATTRACT A NUMBER OF VOTES THAT OTHERWISE WOULD LE TO THIEU.

4. HARKING BACK TO THE THREE KEY QUESTIONS (PARA 1 ABOVE), THE ANSWER TO (A) IS STILL EXTREMELY ELUSIVE; BOTH MINH AND KY ARE CURRENTLY IN THE RACE AND OBSERVERS GNERALLY REGARD THEM AS SERIOUS CANDIDATES; HOWEVER, BOTH STILL HAVE THEIR OPTIONS OPEN TO WITHDRAW. IF KY STAYS THE COURSE, HE WILL MOST LIKELY DRAW MORE VOTES AWAY FROM THIEU THAN FROM MINH. AS FOR FAIRNESS, WE BELIEVE THE ADMINISTRATION IS ON NOTICE (AS ARE ALSO THE TWO MAIN PROSPECTIVE CHALLENGERS) THAT FOR THE WINNER TO COMMAND RESPECT AND SUPPORT, INTERNALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY, HE MUST BE SEEN TO HAVE WON HONESTLY. AT MIDEYEAR, AND THREE MONTHS AWAY FROM THE ELECTION, THIEU STILL APPEARS LIKELY TO WIN, DESPITE THE EMERGENCE OF KY AS A CANDIDATE WITH A SIGNIFICANT "SPOILING" POTENTIAL. END SUMMARY.

5. PROMULGATION OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ECTION LAW ON JUNE 23 SET THE BASIC GROUND RULES FOR THE ELECTION. THE LAW IS MECHANICALLY IMPRESSIVE AND HAS MANY SAFEGUARDS TO MAKE CHEATING MORE DIFFICULT. THE CONTROVERSIAL PROVISION REQUIRING ENDORSEMENTS FOR CANDIDACY FROM 40 NATIONAL ASSEMBLYMEN OR 100 PROVINCIAL OR MUNICIPAL COUNCILMEN HAS BEEN ATTACKED HERE AND ABROAD AS AN ATTEMPT BY PRESIDENT THIEU TO LIMIT THE COMPETITION, BUT THERE IN FACT APPEARS NO DOUBT THAT GENERAL MINH, THE ONLY CHALLENGER WITH A SERIOUS CHANCE TO WIN, CAN QUALIFY AND KY SUPPORTERS MAINTAIN THE VICE PRESIDENT ALSO CAN GET THE NECESSARY BACKING. OTHER NOTEWORTHY FEATURES OF THE LAW: A SUPPLEMENTARY VICE PRESIOENTIAL CANDIDATE IS TO BE INCLUDED ON EACH SLATE AND WOULD BE MOVED UP IF THE PRIMARY ONE DROPS OUT

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BEFORE THE ELECTION: ADVOCATES OF COMMUNISM OR PRO-COMMUNIST NEUTRALISM CANNOT RUN (A LESS SWEEPING DEFINITION THAN 1967); ANYONE WHO HOLDS A VOTERS CARD CAN VOTE (THERE IS NO SPECIFIC PROHIBITION AGAINST VC VOTING); CANDIDATES MUST FILE BY AUGUST 4 AND CANNOT WITHDRAW AFTER AUGUST 24; AND THE OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN PERIOD IS THE ONE MONTH BEOFRE THE ELECTION ON OCTOBER 3. THE SUPREME COURT, A CONSITUTIONALLY INDEPENDENT AND GENERALLY RESPECTED BODY, PASSES ON THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE CANDIDATES AND THE VALIDITY OF THE ELECTION.

6. THIEU IS NOW RALLYING THE PROVINCE CHIEFS AS MAJOR ELEMENTS OF SUPPORT FOR THIS CAMPAIGN AND AS AGENTS TO HELP HIM SELECT ADMINISTRATION CANDIDATES FOR THE AUGUST 29 LOWER HOSUSE ELECTIONS. IN THE LATTER EXERCISE HE IS SEEKING NOT ONLY TO TRADE OFF ADMINISTRATION ASSISTANCE FOR RECIPROCAL SUPPORT IN THE PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST, BUT ALSO TO ASSURE A PRO-EXECUTIVE WORKING MAJORITY IN THE NEW LOWER HOUSE. THIEU CONTINUES TO CULTIVATE CAREFULLY THE VARIOUS ORGANIZED ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES. SINCE HIS ADMINISTRATION HAS BEEN FAVORABLE ON THE WHOLE TO THEIR INTERESTS, AND SINCE HE LOOKS LIKE A WINNER, THEY WILL PROBABLY GIVE MOST OF THEIR SUPPORT TO HIM. HE HAS BEEN LESS SOLICITIOUS OF POLITICAL PARTY LEADERS; NEVERTHELESS, ALTHOUGH SOME MAY FLIRT WITH THE CHALLENGERS TO RAISE THEIR PRICE, MOST OF THEM, TOO, WILL PROBABLY END UP SUPPORTING THIEU. THIEU IS RELYING ON THE APPRECIATION OF THE DELTA FARMER FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN SECURITY AND THE RISE IN PROSPERITY THERE, AS WELL AS FOR THE LAND REFORM EFFORT. HE REMAINS MOST VULNERABLE ON THE ISSUES OF WAR WEARINESS, THE HIGH COST OF LIVING AND CORRUPTION.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SAIGON 10482

LIMDIS
DEPT PLEASE PASS WHITE HOUSE FOR KISSINGER.
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SUBJ: THE VIETNAMESE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION -- CURRENT ASSESSMENT

7. MINH IN EFFECT KICKED OFF HIS CAMPAIGN ON JUNE 17 IN A SPEECH WHICH GAVE HEAVY EMPHASIS TOTHE PEACE THEME, ALTHOUGH, IN ORDER TO COUNTER CHARGES HE FAVORS COALITION, HE TOOK CARE ALSO TO STATE HE WAS A "NATIONALIST COMBATANT" AND NOT AN ADVOCATE OF THE "MIDDLE WAY". HE APPARENTLY INTENDS A DIGNIFIED CAMPAIGN APPEALING TO THE PEOPLE AND CAPITALIZING ON HIS OWN PERSONAL PRESTIGE AND ON THE VARIOUS ISSUES OF CURRENT DISCONTENT. SO FAR MINH HAS POINTEDLY AVOIDED POLITICAL DEALS AND AS A CONSE-QUENCE HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS MAIN POTENTIAL SOURCE OF SUPPORT, THE AN QUANG BUDDHISTS, REMAINS UNCERTAIN. MOST OF THE BUDDHISTS ARE SYMPATHETIC TO HIM BUT HE NEEDS, AND DOES NOT YET HAVE, THE CHURCH'S ACTIVE SUPPORT IN ORGAINIZING AND CAM-PAIGNING FOR HIM. MINH HAS ASSEMBLED A WORKING STAFF BASED ON THE YOUNG ACTIVIST AN QUANG SENATOR TRAN QUANG THUAN AND RESPECTED SOUTHERN DEPUTY HO VAN MINH, ALTHOUGH MINHS OLD CRONIES (E.G. FORMER VICE PRESIDENT THO) CONTINUE TO FUNCTION AS ADVISORS. MINH HAS SUFFERED RECENTLY SOME MINOR SETBACKS:

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STATEMENTS OF NEUTRALITY BY PROMINENT EX-SENATOR TRAN VAN DON AND AN QUANG DE FACTO LEADER THICH TRI QUANG, SOME RESISTANCE AMONG RETIRED COLLEAGUES TO AN EARLY PUBLIC ENDORSEMENT AND THE DEATH OF HIS STAUNCH SUPPORTER, VIETNAM GUARDIAN PUBLISHER, NGUYEN VAN (CHARLIES) TUOI. WE BELIEVE MINH RETAINS THE CAPACITY TO MAKE A GOOD SHOWING WITH AN OUTSIDE CAHNCE OF WINNING IN A RELATIVELY CLEAN ELECTION, PROVIDED HE CAN MOUNT AND PERSEVERE IN A VIGOROUS CAMPAIGN.

8. VICE PRESIDENT KY IS TRYING FRANTICALLY TO CHIP AWAY AT THIEU'S BLOC SUPPORT, I.E. ORGANIZED MINORITIES AND POLITICAL PARTIES, AND HE STANDS A CHANCE OF GETTING SOME OF THE HOA HAO, CAMBODIAN, NORTHERN CATHOLIC AND MILITARY VOTE. KY ALSO IS ATTACKING THIEU'S IMAGE WITH CHARGES OF INCOMPETENCE, DISLOYALTY, TOLERANCE OF CURRUPTION AND SUBSERVIENCE TO THE AMERICANS. IN THE PROCESS, KY IS TRYING TO CARVE OUT A NEW IMAGE FOR HIMSELF AS MORE OF A NATIONALIST THAN THIEU AND AS A MODERATE BETWEEN A JINGOISTIC THIEU AND A MINH SOMEWHAT SOFT ON COMMUNISM (ALTHOUGH SO FAR HE HAS REFRAINED FROM ANY ATTACKS ON THE LATTER). KY IS HARPING PARTICULARLY ON THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, ATTEMPTING TO EXPLOIT CONTRASTS BETWEEN RICH AND POOR AND THE POPULAR RESENTMENT AGAINST WAR PROFITEERING. ELEMENTS IN THE MINH AND KY CAMPS HAVE CONFIRMED THERE IS AN UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THEM THAT MINH WILL GATHER ENDORSEMENTS AMONG THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLYMENT WHILE KY SEEKS THEM AMONG THE PROVINCIAL COUNCILMEN. ASSUMING THIS ARRANGEMENT WILL ENABLE KY TO QUALIFY AS A CANDIDATE, HE HAS LITTLE CHANCE TO WIN IN THE ELECTION SINCE HE IS A NORTHERNER IN A COUNTRY WHERE REGIONAL ANTIPATHIES ARE STRONG. HE MAY CALCULATE THAT THE CAMPAIGN COULD HELP ASSURE HISPROMINENCE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THIEU IN THE LONG RUN. HE COULD POSSIBLY BE HOPING THAT MINH MIGHT WITHDRAW AND LEAVE HIM TO FACE THIEU ALONE. ALTERNATIVELY, AND DEPENDING ON DEVELOPMENTS, HE MIGHT AT A GIVEN POINT WITHDRAW HIMSELF, THROWING HIS SUPPORT TO MINH IN EXCHANGE FOR SUITABLE REWARD IF MINH WINS.

9. THIEU IS REPORTED TO HAVE SAID ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS THAT THERE MIGHT ALSO BE A "CANDIDATE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES". CONSCIOUS OF THE WITHDRAWAL THREAT ON THE PART OF MINH AND KY, THIEU MAY BE PREPARING TO PUMP UP A FOURTH OR SPARE CANDIDATE. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF OLD TIME POLITICIANS ON THE SCENE -- E.G. VNQDD GENERAL NGUYEN HOA HIEP OR EX-DIEMIST TRUONG VINH LE -- WHO

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WOULD BE AVALABLE FOR THE PART. WHILE BETTER THAN A ONE-MAN RACE, SUCH A CONTEST WOULD PROBABLY BE DISMISSED BOTH HERE AND ABROAD AS A HOLLOW EXERCISE.

10. IN THE PROVINCES THE AUGUST 29 LOWER HOUSE ELECTION IS AT THE MOMENT DRAWING EVEN MORE ATTENTION THAN THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE. REPORTEDLY OVER 2000 CANDIDATES WILL BE COMPETING FOR THE 152 SEATS SPECIFIED BY THE MINSTRY OF INTERIOR DECREE. POLITICIANS ARE INTERESTED IN THE POLITICAL PODIUM THE LOWER HOUSE OFFERS AND THE HIGH SALARY IT PAYS. THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC MINORITIES AS WELL AS THE EXECUTIVE, ARE PLANNING FULL-SCALE EFFORTS TO GAIN SIGNIFICANT BLOCS IN THE NEW LOWER HOUSE. AN QUANG HOPES TO GET UP TO 50 SEATS. ITS INTEREST IN COMPETING WITHING THE CONSITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK LENDS STRENGTH TO THE POLITICAL SYSTEM BUT ITS PERSISTENCE ON THIS COURSE WILL DEPEND ON THE MEASURE OF FREEDOM WITH WHICH THE EXECUTIVE ALLOWS AN QUANG TO PURSUE ITS LOWER HOUSE ELECTORAL AMBITIONS. THERE SEEMS TO BE A GOOD CHANCE THE NEW LOWER HOUSE WILL BE FAR MORE RESPECTABLE THAN THE PREVIOUS ILL-REPUTED CHAMBER. THE LOWER HOUSE ELECTION WILL IN ANY EVENT AFFECT AND BE A BELLWETHER FOR THE PRESDIENTIAL ECTION A MONTH LATER.

11. THERE HAVE BEEN A NUMBER OF INCIDENTS WHICH CAST DOUBT ON THE FAIRNESS WITH WHICH THE ADMINISTRATION WILL CONDUCT ITS CAMPAIGNS. MOST NOTABLE ARE THE CONTINUED CONFISCATIONS OF OPPOSITION DAILIES AND REPORTS THAT SOME PROVINCE CHIEFS WILL USE THEIR INFLUENCE TO BUILD UP THE VOTE FOR THIEU AND FOR ADMINISTRATION CANDIDATES IN THE LOWER HOUSE ELECTION. PROSPECTIVE CHALLENGERS PROFESS ALARM. IN A JUNE 23 INTERVIEW WITH THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, MINH, FOR INSTANCE, ASKED THAT THE UNITED STATES ACTIVELY GUARANTEE ELECTORAL HONESTY WITH ITS OWN "MACHINE." IT IS IN THE CHALLENGERS' INTEREST, OF COURSE, STEADILY TO CLAIM FOURL IN ORDER TO GAIN SYMPATHY AND MAINTAIN PRESSURE ON THIEU AND US. TO A LARGE EXTENT THE BURDEN OF PROVING FAIRNESS, HOWEVER, WILL BE ON THE EXECUTIVE SINCE THE MACHINERY OF STATE IS AVAILABLE TO THIEU.

12. SO FAR WE BELIEVE THE ADMINISTRATION HAS NOT PLACED SUFFICIENT IMPORTANCE ON MAKING CLEAR ITS INTENTIONS THAT THE CAMPAIGN AND THE ELECTION WILL INDEED BE CLEAN. ACCORDINGLY, IT HAS BEEN EMPHASIZED TO PRESIDENT THIEU, TO THE PROSPECTIVE CHALLENGERS AND TO THEIR SUPPORTERS THAT WE CONSIDER IT VITAL

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THAT THE PEOPLE HAVE AN HONEST CHANCE TO MAKE THEIR CHOICE FREELY AND THAT THE ELECTIONS BE SEEN BY ALL TO BE FAIR.
BUNKER

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